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Getting lost in translation? An analysis of the international engagement of practitioners and policy-makers with the educational effectiveness research base

Alma Harris^{a*}, Christopher Chapman^b, Daniel Muijs^c and David Reynolds^c

^a*Institute of Educational Leadership, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia;*

^b*University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK;* ^c*University of Southampton, Southampton, UK*
with

Carol Campbell, *OISE, Toronto.*

Bert Creemers, *University of Groningen, The Netherlands.*

Lorna Earl, *APORIA Consulting.*

Leonidas Kyriakides, *University of Cyprus.*

Gonzalo Munoz, *Fundacion Chile.*

Louise Stoll, *Institute of Education, London.*

Sam Stringfield, *University of Louisville, USA.*

Boudewijn van Velzen, *APS, The Netherlands.*

Jose Weinstein, *Fundacion Chile.*

Educational effectiveness research (EER) has accumulated much knowledge in the areas of school effectiveness research (SER), teacher effectiveness research (TER) and school/system improvement research (SSIR). Yet many schools and educational systems are not making enough use of the material and their insights. The article reviews evidence of practitioner engagement and finds it limited in the areas of SER, greater in the area of TER and most prevalent in SSIR. Policy-maker engagement has been notable in some countries, but more limited in others. The article concludes by arguing for a new paradigm of EER that studies multiple levels of the educational system simultaneously utilising multiple methods and involves practitioners and policy-makers in a true EER community of expertise, in order to increase the reach and take-up of the discipline.

Keywords: educational effectiveness; school effectiveness; teacher effectiveness; school improvement

Introduction

Over the last three decades the educational effectiveness research (EER) field, comprising school effectiveness research (SER), teacher effectiveness research (TER) and school/system improvement research (SSIR), has generated a considerable volume of empirical evidence that constitutes a substantial, significant and robust knowledge base. Its origins have come from many countries (see the historical reviews in Teddlie and Reynolds 2000, and Townsend 2007, together with the recent surveys in Chapman et al. 2012). Undoubtedly, the creation of the International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement (ICSEI) in 1988 helped link

*Corresponding author. Email: almaharris@um.edu.my

researchers in the field together, and assisted in the wider international dissemination of that knowledge base. Most accounts (e.g. Barber 2007) credit the effectiveness and improvement ‘movement’ with a positive effect upon educational standards, although the field has not been devoid of critique. Some have called for the field to be ‘realistic’ (Thrupp 1999) while others have posed the question ‘School effectiveness for whom?’ (Slee, Weiner, and Tomlinson 1998). More recently, Gorard (2010, 2011) has launched a methodological attack and attempted to conflate the field with policy-making. Over the years, these critiques have been robustly countered (e.g. Reynolds and Teddlie 2001) and SER researchers continue to challenge general misunderstandings pertaining to statistics and the field’s relationship with policy-makers (Reynolds et al. 2012). Notwithstanding these debates the EER knowledge base has provided:

- Reliable evidence about the characteristics of effective schools, effective teaching practices and effective improvement at the school and system level; and
- Robust evidence about how outcomes at school and teacher levels improve, and, more recently, emerging evidence about how system level characteristics may also be levered to generate positive change.

Yet, despite this important and substantive research platform, many schools and systems are still not using this knowledge base to formulate their approaches to teacher, school and system level change and improvement. Many schools and educational systems seem wedded to approaches to improvement that the EER research base has shown are manifestly unlikely to work (Payne 2008). It remains the case that we continue to see the selection and implementation of school reform and improvement approaches, interventions and strategies that have little, if any, grounding in robust or reliable empirical evidence (Harris 2012) and are decoupled from the context within which they are enacted (Chapman et al. 2012). Although policy-makers have advocated evidence-based policy in a number of countries, and there is some evidence of an increased uptake of evidence (albeit in a rather changeable fashion), many policy-makers remain content to advocate improvement solutions with only cursory or no attention to the research base associated with that change or intervention (Cooper, Levin, and Campbell 2009). Similarly, while many schools are making concerted attempts to access and indeed actively utilise research evidence through the creation of links with universities and various forms of research and development activities, many practitioners are still coaxed into accepting improvement strategies, approaches and packages supported by the thinnest veneer of research evidence (e.g. Simmons 2011). It still remains the case that rarely are original research findings looked at in order to discern the value and legitimacy of the approaches being advocated, or in some cases imposed.

The question is why? Why do some practitioners and policy-makers take account of our research in their decision-making and their daily practice and others do not? The first and most obvious answer to this question is quite clearly connected to the nature of the research findings themselves. Usually written for other researchers, the language, style and format of research reports, journal articles and academic texts can be off-putting, difficult to interpret and sometimes impossible to navigate. A second answer can be found in the sheer volume and extent of the EER research base. Looking for specific evidence would be a daunting proposition for any

practitioner or policy-maker unfamiliar with the research terrain. Third, with some exceptions, the field may not have placed sufficient priority or effort on making its research findings accessible to non-specialist audiences.

But this cannot be the whole story. These three factors are not different from the situation in many other fields of knowledge where there is a scientific community with a research orientation determined to push the boundaries in terms of new knowledge, theory and understanding. It would be a similar situation in medicine, for example, but medical research can point to a considerable impact upon practice, upon the professionals in health care and upon the knowledge of the general public about medical matters, as even a cursory glance at any newspaper in any country would show. Indeed, the very success of medical science in its take-up and impact has proven a model for those who wish to encourage an evidence-based orientation in educational research (e.g. Slavin 1996).

This article provides an analysis of the extent to which the EER knowledge base has been used by the two key constituencies of practitioners and policy-makers. It also speculates about what might be done to close the gap between what EER research suggests should be happening in schools, classrooms and educational systems and what is actually happening. It is important to acknowledge that this article is inevitably selective, rather than comprehensive, in the choice of studies and findings. It uses indicative evidence to reflect upon the contribution of the EER field but to also highlight what seem to be some of the reasons why policy-makers and practitioners are not engaging sufficiently with the available evidence.

Practitioner engagement with SER

Unequivocally, the very early phases of SER in the 1980s had a significant impact on both policy and practice. Seminal SER studies like the 'Junior School Project' (Mortimore et al. 1988) underlined just how much difference schools made and provided the profession with a degree of renewed optimism, self-efficacy and purpose. The characteristics of an effective school were widely publicised and replicated in many publications. OFSTED utilised SER findings in its Inspection Framework (Sammons, Hillman, and Mortimore 1995), and as a result practitioners in schools and local authorities used these lists of characteristics as both a self-assessment tool and a basis for prioritising school development. Through engagement in local and national training events, literally thousands of UK teachers, and many more overseas, became familiar with the factors associated with an effective school and subsequently some were also made aware of (and some teachers actively used) the factors associated with effective departments in secondary schools (Harris 2004; Reynolds 2010b; Sammons 1999). In the UK, many teachers also became aware of SER through its impact upon the design of the national strategies in Literacy and Numeracy.

SER was also made accessible to thousands of teachers internationally through discrete projects or programmes that were based on its findings. One of the most cited examples of a District-wide programme based on SER research is the 'Halton Model': in 1986, the Halton Board of Education in Ontario, Canada, initiated an Effective Schools Project based upon the work of Mortimore et al. (1988) that was a practical application of SER in a Canadian school district with its 83 schools (Stoll and Fink 1996). The model was predicated upon engaging practitioners with SER

findings in order to drive school improvement and change. There were, of course, many other such improvement projects and programmes predicated and framed by the SER findings where practitioners engaged, sometimes without fully recognising it, with the SER research base (Harris and Chrispeels 2008).

However, with the exception of the early SER studies, it is difficult to find much evidence of subsequent sustained take-up of research findings and insights at practitioner level, except where they are part of mandated national strategies (as in Wales currently in the form of the School Effectiveness Framework) or where national policies are closely tailored to research evidence (as in the case of the English Literacy and Numeracy Strategies in the 2000s).

Explanations for this state of affairs include the following characteristics of the SER knowledge base itself:

- The historic concentration within it upon the school ‘level’, rather than upon the teacher ‘level’ and related issues of teaching methods and classroom practices to which teachers are more likely to be committed and interested as their ‘focal concerns’, may have cost us interest and commitment;
- The historic absence (until the development of the dynamic theory of Creemers and Kyriakides 2006) of any over-arching theories that would connect and explain the patterns and results shown in individual studies, and which could provide a rationale for action by practitioners;
- The methodological structure of the field, in which schools that historically have ‘added value’ are necessarily used as blueprints, generating a backward-looking focus upon ‘what worked’ rather than upon ‘what might work in the future’ and a conservative orientation that explores ‘what is’ rather than explores ‘what might be’;
- The multiple criticisms of SER within certain national cultures (e.g. the UK, USA and Australia), which were often quite extensively publicised in practitioner-orientated media;
- The historic early concentration upon academic outcome measures within SER that, although in recent years supplemented by much greater emphasis upon social and affective outcomes, may not have endeared our field to a profession which in many countries has had a ‘liberal’ orientation and commitment to a more ‘progressive’ educational ideology that places considerable importance on non-academic outcomes;
- The simplistic, ‘one size fits all’, universal ‘checklists’ or ‘tick-boxes’ of effectiveness inducing factors that in their simplicity and inability to be context specific may have seemed superficial to practitioners, particularly given their own complex, highly varied work contexts and the considerable complexity of much of the other educational research (for example from the psychology of education) that they were familiar with;
- The historic ‘craft’ orientation of teacher training, in which trainees soak up knowledge from ‘master craftsmen/women’ and then try it out under supervision, may have led to a lack of understanding of the SER empirical/rational paradigm in its language, its concerns about reliability and validity and its quantitative methodology;
- The historic divide between SER and SSIR, which meant that practitioners may have known about the factors associated with effectiveness but would not

have routinely known about the processes necessary to put the effectiveness 'correlates' in place.

The experience of SER research in the USA (Schaffer and Stringfield 2011) suggests two final explanations for low take-up that may well also exist in other countries. This is the fact that people could claim familiarity with the content of SER through knowing the concepts, but not actually implement them in practice. Also, the emergence of dozens, perhaps hundreds, of marketers who have sold substandard and ineffectual one-day workshops on 'school effectiveness' and 'how to improve your schools' has undoubtedly contributed to a poor opinion of the SER field among some practitioners, and to ongoing low levels of engagement with the field.

Practitioner engagement with TER

While the above analysis of SER shows that impact has often been variable, the position of TER is even more diverse. The development of TER in the 1960s and 1970s (see Muijs et al. 2011) led to significant interest, certainly among practitioners, and fed into the production of manuals and textbooks for use in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) (e.g. Borich 2010; Muijs and Reynolds 2011; Ornstein and Lasley 2003), although the field has certainly not been uncontested (e.g. Wrigley 2004) and influence has been far from universal. To understand the impact of TER it is useful to look at two main developmental phases where one might expect to encounter such influence, ITE and CPD.

Initial teacher education

An initial point to make regarding the impact of TER on ITE is the sheer diversity of methods and approaches. These range from largely academic programmes with limited classroom practice, to four-year university programmes (such as exist in a range of European countries), to short classroom-based programmes as in the increasingly popular alternative certification programme Teach for All (known as Teach for Country or Teach First in most countries), with one-year postgraduate programmes being the norm in a range of countries also.

The knowledge base from TER is situated mainly in the pedagogical domain of university-based programmes, although the picture is complicated because some TER findings have become part of 'accepted practice' to such an extent that they appear separated from the research that initially generated them. For example, structuring lessons by providing an overview of objectives at the start and summary of key points at the end, as is now common practice in English schools, is something that emerged from the US studies of Good and Brophy (1996), although this would rarely be acknowledged in the education that teachers receive. In some countries, such as Cyprus, this acknowledgement of TER is more explicit.

TER has been criticised, mainly for what is seen as its behaviourist theoretical background and focus on basic skills, which has led many teacher educators to turn to other sources to develop their programmes. The behaviourist critique rests in part on a misunderstanding and a confusion of research methods (which, certainly in the initial studies, used an input-process-product paradigm as in SER that could be

termed behaviourist), and a focus on the behaviours of teachers (which was the primary focus of studies in this area). The criticism that TER focused primarily on basic skills acquisition, on the other hand, is justified by much of the history of the field, and it is certainly true that the TER researchers were slow to study areas such as metacognition and higher-order skills. This has, however, changed in recent years with TER researchers engaging in study of higher-order thinking skills, metacognition and also non-cognitive outcomes (see Muijs et al. 2011), again showing that the methodologies employed in TER are applicable both to broader outcomes and to non-behaviourist models of learning.

These later studies are leading to interesting and robust findings on, for example, the effectiveness of different strategies to develop metacognitive skills (e.g. van der Werf, Opdenakker, and Kuyper 2008). So far these studies have not been translated into practitioner-friendly programmes to the same extent as the earlier basic skills-focused studies. A final problem in the relationship between TER and ITE is the largely quantitative and highly statistical nature of the research base that is challenging and not easily accessible by those working in ITE.

Overall, however, it is clear that TER has had and retains an influence in ITE, whilst the extent of this influence is variable.

Continuing professional development

Within CPD, the impact of TER is more difficult to detect. Programmes are delivered in a wide range of ways by different providers, drawing upon a range of research bases or, in a considerable number of cases, no reliable or valid research base at all (e.g. Coffield et al. 2004; Harris 2012).

There are, however, examples of CPD provision that draw explicitly on TER. For example, the Teacher Effectiveness Enhancement Programme (TEEP) was developed by the Gatsby Charitable Trust in 2002 to further the professional development of teachers in England, mainly in STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths). While the programme draws on a range of sources such as Assessment for Learning (Black and Wiliam 1999), it was at least partly based on knowledge from TER presented to the Charitable Trust by Muijs and Reynolds (2000). Evaluation of the project has generally been positive, showing change in behaviours and attitudes of teachers (Gunraj 2010). TER has also led to the development of a number of highly structured programmes for teacher development in delivering basic skills, such as Direct Instruction, which again has shown positive findings in a range of studies (the programme had a particularly strong positive effect in Hattie's (2008) meta analysis of educational interventions), although it remains controversial because of its prescriptive nature. In the Netherlands, a number of programmes have focused on TER-based work in their classroom intervention component (Houtveen, van de Grift, and Creemers 2004). Many teachers also access TER research through professional development aimed at school improvement, which usually includes a classroom practice element. These are described more fully in the next section of this article.

One problem with TER as a research base for CPD, however, is the fact that its focus on teacher behaviours that improve basic skills may make it less suited to developing the skills of more experienced teachers. Kyriakides, Creemers, and Antoniou (2009) have shown that teachers' skills can be classified along a

developmental trajectory, the first three stages of which can be seen as comprising direct and active instruction approaches typically studied by TER, with the final two being related to developing higher order skills. As the trajectory is linked to teacher experience, the lacunae in the TER knowledge base regarding these higher order processes limit its direct application to CPD for experienced teachers. The further development of TER research in this area is likely to diminish this problem.

The second limiting factor in the take-up of TER for CPD is again the lack of accessible research summaries – this issue will be revisited in the concluding section of this article.

Practitioner engagement with SSIR

Following the predominance of the school effectiveness movement in the 1980, the school improvement field emerged in the mid-1990s. The SSIR field has evolved through a number of phases which are not mutually exclusive because they overlap and flow into one another, but represent a natural progression. Phase 1 provided a foundation with its emphasis on how organisations improve through specific interventions and highlighted the importance of culture in any change process.

Phase 2 focused on teacher action research, school self-review, and concern for meeting the needs of disadvantaged students. It was here that practitioner engagement with the SSIR research was clearly strong and visible through the active participation in forms of enquiry, review and collaboration. School improvement during this phase was often characterised as implementing innovation or engaging in action research projects. In several countries, especially the USA and Australia, it was also driven by Federal funding to address the needs of schools serving disadvantaged students.

A range of programmes actively embraced the SSIR research including: the Comer School Development Model (Comer 1992), Glickman's Renewing America's Schools (1993), Levin's Accelerated Schools (Hopfenberg, Levin and Associates 1993), Sizer's Coalition of Essential Schools (1989), Slavin's Success for All (Slavin 1996; Slavin and Madden 2010), and the New American Schools designs (Stringfield, Ross, and Smith 1996). These 'whole-school design' approaches combined elements from the school effectiveness and school improvement research bases. The evidence to date, however, suggests that many of these external interventions, although very well-intentioned, have had patchy and variable success (Borman et al. 2003).

The third phase of development of SSIR rose to prominence in the early 1990s. In this decade, the school improvement tradition was beginning to provide schools and practitioners with concrete guidelines and strategies for the management and implementation of change at the school level. There was a greater focus on organisational and classroom change, reflected in approaches to staff development premised on models of teaching (Joyce and Showers 1995). Again in this phase there were high levels of practitioner interest and engagement as it was becoming increasingly clear that teachers' change was at the heart of school-level change and improvement.

Programmes such as Improving the Quality of Education for All (Hopkins 2002) and High Reliability Schools (Reynolds, Stringfield, and Schaffer 2006; Stringfield, Reynolds, and Schaffer 2008, 2010) in England, the Improving School Effectiveness Project in Scotland (MacBeath and Mortimore 2001), the Manitoba School

Improvement Project in Canada (Earl et al. 2003) and the Dutch National School Improvement Project (see Van velzen et al. 1985) were all examples of projects in this third phase (see Harris and Young 2000; Hopkins 2001; Teddlie and Reynolds 2000). All of these interventions established a key that, in general, schools are more likely to achieve measurable improvements in student performance if they are connected to an external reform process than if they try to go it alone (Nunnery 1998).

Harris and Chrispeels (2008) have argued that the fourth phase of school improvement is largely concerned with building collective capacity through generating professional collaboration and networking across schools and districts. It is in this phase that, arguably, there has been the strongest relationship between SSIR, practitioners and professional learning. In Wales, Canada, Belgium and many other countries, practitioner engagement through professional learning communities and/or professional networks has been the key lever for building system-wide capacity for productive change and improvement (Harris 2011; Harris and Jones 2010). This phase is characterised by a movement away from traditional professional development approaches, which are reliant on giving information to teachers, to a focus on generating professional learning through systematic enquiry and collaboration. Hopkins et al. (2011) argue we are entering a fifth phase of school improvement involving the global spread of the SSIR knowledge base and the need to learn more about achieving systemic reform.

Put simply, school improvement research and practice has evolved from the position where small groups of activists concentrated their efforts on working directly with teachers in their classrooms to support action research-orientated approaches, to a focus on leadership and management arrangements designed to enhance organisational capacity. More recently, the field has focused on building lateral relationships between schools to promote organisational systemic capacity building. These shifts in foci have drawn many school improvement researchers and practitioners away from classrooms and schools and deeper into policy generation and system reform (Chapman 2012).

These trends have not replaced each other: rather, they have built on the previous phase, at times reinforcing earlier work and at others resting a little uncomfortably on it. Either way SSIR has left a lasting legacy in classrooms, schools and governments. This has resulted in a layered picture where SSIR effect and practice exists in different forms at different levels of the system. For example, in England one can find schools that have adopted inquiry-based approaches to their practice. In some cases this can be traced back to involvement in a school improvement project led by a team of researchers (such as IQEA) working directly with teachers, whilst in others this might come from a national initiative adopting inquiry-based practice, such as the Networked Learning Communities programme administered by the National College of School Leadership.

Experience suggests that practitioners will readily engage with research findings if there are the opportunities to do so in a way that enhances and extends their own professional learning and expertise. There are a number of ways practitioners engage with SSIR findings. These include:

- **HEI higher degree programmes** – There has been an expansion of degree programmes in effectiveness, leadership, effectiveness and improvement. Many

of these are led and taught by researchers engaged in SSIR and structured around recent findings and key debates within the field.

- **Government Supported CPD** – This can take the form of nationally mandated training that draws on SSIR evidence, or local CPD opportunities co-ordinated by school districts or other sub-units of government.
- **Non-Government Supported CPD** – This may include one-off events or structured discrete packages of consultancy services bought in directly by schools or groups of schools.
- **Ad hoc CPD** – This may include practitioners engaging with the SSIR evidence by purchasing books, visiting websites and subscribing to professional and academic journals.

Clearly, the opportunities for engaging in SSIR findings are far greater than those outlined above. However, this basic taxonomy provides an initial framework for thinking about the mechanisms of possible engagement – formal/informal, structured/non-structured, government supported/non-government supported.

In short, powerful professional learning based on SSIR, whether through professional learning communities, action learning groups, networks or latterly the Teaching Schools in England, has provided a platform where practitioners can interrogate research evidence in a meaningful and relevant way.

Policy-maker engagement

As a discipline that has generated a valid body of knowledge about ‘what works’ at school, classroom and increasingly country and educational system level, one might have expected a considerable take-up of SER, TER and SSIR insights by policy-makers internationally. The actual picture of take-up is mixed, however, with little impact in many countries but considerable influence in some.

SER was highly influential in the USA in the 1980s, largely due to its adherence to a very simple model of effective school practice independent of context (Edmonds 1979). Currently, the US Congress and Department of Education are requiring that the 50 States and 1500 Districts ‘turn around’ persistently low-performing schools. They clearly imply that school effects variables (data use, instructional leadership, etc) will be key to these efforts. At the same time, they all but mandate other changes (removal of principals and at least half of schools’ staffs, the option of hiring a for-profit group to run a school) that have not been shown in research to work to turn around schools (Muijs et al. 2004). What is becoming evident is that the 50 states do not know how to turn schools around, and are trying to find ways to address this mandate while trying to look calm and competent. The state departments seem much less sure that school effects and school improvement research can ‘work’ in the world of educating high poverty students in high poverty communities (the locations that spawned SER).

In the UK, the ‘New Labour’ government in the late-1990s and 2000s used SER and TER as the foundations of its National Strategies and some of its policies to improve weaker schools (see Reynolds 2010b; Sammons 2008), but the association with ‘prescription’ meant that the influence was relatively short-lived. However, the English inspection agency OFSTED utilised SER in its Inspection Framework (see Sammons, Hillman, and Mortimore 1995), and the documentation upon school

improvement that each English school has historically filled in for school self-evaluation drew upon the evidence about within-school variation (Reynolds 2010a). In addition, in England value-added measures of school effectiveness based upon multilevel analysis using SER approaches were introduced in 2002 and contextual value-added measures after 2005 to supplement raw league tables. However, after a change of government they were abolished in 2010, because they recognised the link between school results and student intake characteristics such as ethnicity and socio-economic status, a topic regarded as politically unacceptable.

In the Netherlands, while SER has been influential in the past, there is not much reference to it anymore. In school improvement, projects are announced or sold as evidence-based that actually do not meet the criteria (Hofman et al. 2012). SER has, however, been important in the evaluation scheme used by the Inspectorate and the emphasis given on student learning outcomes.

Other countries, however, do show greater evidence of the use of EER, and particularly SER, in policy development.

In Cyprus, there is much reference to EER in policy in teacher education. The educational system in Cyprus is centralised and the pedagogical institute (which belongs to the Ministry of Education) is the only institution that is responsible for providing INSET courses. Courses on EER are offered to all newly promoted deputy heads and head teachers. Moreover, an INSET programme that is offered to newly appointed teachers (an induction programme) is concerned with the development of teaching skills that are associated with TER and especially those teacher factors included in the dynamic model (Creemers and Kyriakides 2006). It is finally important to refer to the impact that EER had on the development of new national teacher and school evaluation system.

Ontario provides an example of close relationships between EER and policy-making (Cooper, Levin, and Campbell 2009). Educational effectiveness and improvement research has both been used and generated within the Ontario education system, at the policy and practice levels. In Wales, there is systematic use of SER and TER findings currently (Reynolds 2008). Townsend (2007) documents interest – but not mainstreaming – in many other countries. But it is noted that in these contexts EER is bolt-on, not bloodstream, for the policy-makers.

Outside of the Western context, the role of international agencies has been at the forefront of developing EER in policy. The OECD and UNESCO's International Institute for Educational Planning, for example, have produced a number of publications on school effectiveness (e.g. Scheerens 2000) that have been influential in some countries. In Chile, for example, the impact of EER is significant and has strongly increased over the last decade. Educational research has enabled the construction of a 'common basis' of knowledge concerning the condition of the Chilean school system, putting on the table not only the issue of 'poor learning quality' but also, above all, the highly unequal social distribution of such learning. International agencies (in the Chilean case, especially the OECD) have played an important role in applying this 'pressure' through their research, where they have evaluated – revealing their good and bad results as well as introducing a comparative perspective – the educational policies that have been developed in Chile since the 1980s (Weinstein, Munoz, and Rczynsky 2011).

The reasons for the variability in the reach of EER into policy/practice reach may be as follows:

- The quantitative statistical knowledge required to fully access some of the knowledge base that is not possessed by policy-makers;
- The considerable volume of criticisms of EER that has emerged, given that politicians may tend to gravitate to the popular, instinctively;
- The reluctance to embrace a discipline that now repeatedly argues for the primacy of teacher effects rather than school effects, given that policy-makers have seemed happier operating at school rather than classroom level;
- The reluctance to embrace a discipline that increasingly argues for ‘contextually specific’ policies, given historic policy-maker commitment to ‘steam press’, universal or ‘one size fits all’ ones;

It is important to also acknowledge that there are likely to be issues relating research to policy, and in relating closely to policy-makers. The first issue concerning the interaction between the two groups is likely to be the different timelines of the two groups, policy-makers and researchers. Policy-makers have a short-term orientation, working to ‘fix’ things and then move on. This short-termism reflects, more than anything, professional facts of life in the policy-maker community. Whereas researchers aim to produce valid and reliable explanations and descriptions of educational matters over time, policy-makers are moved ceaselessly between policy areas, between ministries and encouraged to deliver promptly (Reynolds 2012).

In order for policy-maker engagement to increase, ways of handling the tensions outlined here need clearly to be found. Constant repetition of the same message in interaction with policy-makers helps, as also does attempting to know politicians and policy-makers outside their formal organisational roles.

On the basis of their experience in Ontario and interviews with policy-makers there, Campbell and Fulford (2009) argue that the following elements are key to connecting policy-makers with research:

- The importance of having access to research with content highly relevant to policy-makers;
- The vital role of communication and mobilisation strategies to make such research accessible in a timely way;
- The need to develop capacity amongst government officials to understand how to access, interpret and apply research and also to build the capacity of researchers to navigate within policy processes; and
- The crucial role of collaboration between research and policy communities to interact, influence and develop shared knowledge.

Building sustained networks with both policy-makers and practitioners is central to influencing policy and practice, and again requires sustained engagement from the research community. Where research has been most influential on policy such as in Ontario and Chile, there appears to be a high porosity between research and policy. It is frequently the case that the same persons working in education research also temporarily hold high positions in educational policy. This strongly advocates for, rather than against, active involvement of researchers with government.

Increasingly, research knowledge is disseminated to policy-makers and practitioners through a range of intermediary parties, such as consultants, ‘think tanks’ and research clearing houses. This has some clear advantages, in that these

intermediaries are often skilled at presenting and disseminating information in policy-maker and practitioner-friendly formats, and can draw on a range of connections. A danger, however, is that findings may get distorted in the process or filtered in ways that do not reflect the original findings.

The benefits of enhancing engagement with policy and practice

We have outlined some of the issues that explain lack of engagement by some policy-makers and practitioners with SER, TER and SSIR. But why exactly do we wish for enhanced engagement at all?

First, if our knowledge bases are accurate about the factors that promote student progress, then more engagement is itself likely to improve the outcomes of schools, classrooms and educational systems. Our moral purpose and mission as a field would therefore be satisfied.

Second, listening to the ‘voice’ of the practitioner community is likely to help our research to be more valid, and particularly it would be helpful if more practitioners were themselves researchers in order to both increase their own ability to generate knowledge and to ensure that the research that existed was of high quality and relevance. Much of the neglect of the classroom level within SER would have been negated if practitioners had influenced the early designs of SER researchers, for example.

Third, there is much to gain from an allegiance with policy-makers, although we need to avoid empirical research being selectively used or ‘cherry picked’ and distorted to serve policy-makers’ ends. This implies better two-way communication and understanding of what research can influence and what it cannot.

Conclusions – the changes needed to enhance take-up of EER

So how as a research community do we make the links with practitioners and policy-makers stronger and more reciprocally beneficial? First, we need to pay attention to our existing patterns of research design and methodology, and generate research that is:

- Multilevel, involving the simultaneous study of the classroom, the school and the educational system, both local and national, since that is the world that practitioners and policy-makers inhabit;
- Of the highest possible quality, allowing us to develop authoritative findings that are convincing to policy-makers and practitioners;
- Possessed of theoretical explanations that move us beyond checklists that convince nobody;
- Relevant to the multiple outcomes that practitioners and policy-makers believe are the goals of education;
- Contemporary, alive and conducted with the multiple methods that make research more accessible to non-specialist practitioner and policy-maker audiences.

But, second, we need to move beyond the very structure and parameters of the fields themselves that have to a certain degree constrained our research and understanding, and to reinvent and transform our discipline.

The EER field has evolved over three decades in a relatively incremental way, usually compartmentalising findings into the separate areas of SER, TER and SSIR. This demarcation has made the generation of over-arching theories difficult, if not impossible. Moving from the individual school to the system as the central unit of change now requires a new conceptualisation of what school effectiveness and school improvement actually means. It requires research of a different order and scale. It requires new theorising that overshadows and overcomes the traditional fracturing within the EER field that has undoubtedly contributed to its demise as a force for change with policy-makers and practitioners. It is questionable how far the structure of the current fields can persist, if the aim is to productively engage those constituencies that can use the research evidence to best effect. The ongoing intellectual compartmentalisation that has characterised the field for such a long time needs to be replaced with a new discourse and *modus operandi* that redefines EER research as an integrated field; not as loosely connected groups of researchers only interested in a part, but not the whole.

It is only as a tightly integrated and fully iterative field that EER will ever have the influence on policy-makers and practitioners that it deserves. Currently, much of this enormous potential and opportunity is being wasted as both policy-makers and practitioners struggle to cross the many fault lines that characterise the field.

We need to convince practitioners and policy-makers, tired of the ever-decreasing circles of over-familiar findings and replicated debate, that the EER field is worth listening to again. There are a number of ways forward. First, there needs to be a new paradigm, not SER or SSIR or TER but a new discourse around teacher, school and system improvement informed by EER but much more contemporary in orientation and fit for purpose. While the EER field has a tendency to look back, with good reason, other more fleet-footed commercial companies like McKinsey (2007, 2010) are looking forward and are influencing policy-makers and practitioners around the globe, not least due to their clear and compelling messages. This is an approach we could learn from. Distilling complex research findings into more digestible forms and repeating the message is a more effective way of influencing policy and practice than constant talk of complexity.

Second, we need to combine different research methodologies much more powerfully. We need to use more multi-method analyses that tell a compelling story about exactly how to lever better performance effectively and sustainably at all levels in the system.

Finally, we need to invert the dominant model of research-informed practice and research-informed policy-making. It is the dynamic interaction between research, policy and practice that matters most of all. Therefore, we need more practitioner-led research, more policy-directed research, more research-led policy and more research-led practice, not as empty, meaningless labels or phrases but to generate a true community of expertise. As Chapman (2012, 43) argues:

working with politicians and policy makers to influence systemic change and working with schools and teachers are not mutually exclusive activities. It has long been recognized that a complex mix of top down and bottom up activity, tailored to specific contexts, is required to optimize improvement efforts.

If the sum is really to be greater than that of the parts, then we need to see policy-makers and practitioners not as the mere consumers of research or knowledge but as co-producers, playing an important and equal role in identifying and generating new understandings about how to get the very best from our schools and school systems. The answer does not just lie in more accessible research findings, although that would be welcome, but rather in repositioning EER as a field that naturally and seamlessly embraces and engages practitioners and policy-makers in the core of our work, not at the periphery or as an afterthought. The alternative is that as three sub-fields we continue to talk past each other and that all our disconnected efforts are simply 'getting lost in translation'.

Notes on contributors

Alma Harris is Director at the Institute of Educational Leadership, University of Malaya, Malaysia.

Christopher Chapman has recently taken up a Chair at the University of Glasgow.

Daniel Muijs is Chair of Education at the University of Southampton.

David Reynolds is Chair of Educational Effectiveness at the University of Southampton.

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